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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 000335

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TAGS: PGOV PROP ECON ELTN SOCI CH

SUBJECT: CENTER MOBILIZES TO DEAL WITH SNOWSTORM; MAJOR INSTABILITY UNLIKELY, CONTACTS SAY

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    1C. GUANGZHOU 48  
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Classified By: Political Internal Unit Chief Dan Krittenbrink.  
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

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11. (C) At last grasping the severity of the disruptions caused by snowstorms in south and central China that have affected millions of travelers headed home for the Chinese New Year holiday (reflets), China's central leadership on January 29 and 30 launched an all-out effort to mobilize Party and Government resources to deal with the problem. Meeting in special session on January 29, the Politburo decreed that authorities must "realize the severity of the situation" and make disaster relief their "top priority." More than 500,000 troops have reportedly been dispatched to the disaster areas. Premier Wen Jiabao traveled to Hunan and Guangdong Provinces to oversee relief efforts and give encouragement to those affected. Though the storms pose an enormous challenge to authorities, who reportedly fear a possible backlash if their response is perceived as ineffective, Embassy contacts say major instability is unlikely as the center brings its "awesome resources" to bear. Nevertheless, at a minimum, the storms are predicted to exacerbate inflation, already hovering at 11-year highs. End Summary.

Center Mobilizes: Politburo Meets, Wen Greets

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12. (U) Communist Party General Secretary Hu Jintao chaired a special meeting of the Politburo January 29 as China's central leadership mobilized to deal with snowstorms that continue to cause paralysis of rail, road and air transport networks during the peak Chinese New Year travel season. The Politburo, according to an official Xinhua News Agency release, urged local authorities to make disaster relief their "top priority," "fully realize the severity" of the situation and "take responsibility for the people." January 28-29, Premier Wen Jiabao traveled by air and rail to Hunan Province, where he apologized to stranded passengers at Changsha's train station for the delays and conveyed his condolences to families of power workers killed while trying to remove ice from local electrical lines. During the trip journalists

also photographed Wen boarding passenger busses stranded on the Jingzhu Highway, China's major north-south roadway. Premier Wen moved on to Guangdong January 30 (ref A).

#### The Current Situation

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**¶3.** (U) As of January 28, the disaster had impacted 77.9 million people in 14 provinces and caused 24 fatalities (10 in buildings that collapsed due to snow, 10 in falls, 2 by drowning and 2 due to falling trees), according to the Xinhua News Agency. An additional 25 persons died January 29 in a weather-related bus crash in Zunyi County, Guizhou Province. According to the South China Morning Post, the government has mobilized 500,000 troops (a combination of both People's Liberation Army (PLA) and People's Armed Police (PAP)) to assist those cut off by the storms. Indicating that the disaster may continue, China's National Meteorological Center was forecasting that low temperatures will continue in areas south of the Yangtze River for ten more days.

**¶4.** (U) China's Ministry of Public Security (MPS) used a previously scheduled press conference January 30 to discuss the current transport situation. MPS Spokesman Wu Heping said the Hunan portion of the Jingzhu Highway was still closed, and 5,000 cars were backed up for 25 kilometers at the Hunan-Hubei border. While Hunan remained the hardest hit, with roads there covered with up to seven centimeters of ice, Wu said roadways in Anhui, Jiangxi, Guizhou and Guangxi were slowly returning to normal. Wu also reported that no significant violent crime had taken place in the disaster area.

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**¶5.** (C) Embassy contacts meanwhile told tales of friends and relatives in the south who were caught completely unprepared for the storm. Beijing resident Wang Dequan (protect) told Poloff January 30 that he is worried for his older brother in Guiyang, Guizhou Province. Wang said his brother's family remains stuck in their home with no heat due to the ice storms that have knocked out electricity. Wang said his greatest fear is that his brother's family could possibly poison themselves by using a makeshift coal burner inside their apartment. Separately, an Embassy contact in Hubei described being stranded in Wuhan January 26-28 because highways were completely impassable.

#### Major Instability Unlikely, Contacts Say

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**¶6.** (C) Though our contacts believe the storm presents a major political and public relations challenge for the central authorities, none predicted the disaster would result in wide-scale disorder. Ding Xueliang (protect), a Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment's Beijing office, told PolOff January 29 the crisis presents a special challenge for the government because of the desire to keep unrest in check as China prepares for the 2008 Olympics. Provincial cadres are under tremendous pressure to avoid any demonstrations caused by the transport delays, and thus local officials are being proactive in providing stranded passengers with food, water and other services. Ding did not characterize the transport difficulties as a potential source of serious unrest.

**¶7.** (C) Similarly, Chen Qin (strictly protect) journalism professor and former editor of the National Development and Reform Commission-affiliated Zhongguo

Gaige, told PolOff January 30 that the crisis, though impacting huge swaths of China, is "not a direct threat" to national stability. While the severe weather has highlighted infrastructure problems, the snowstorms are the worst that have hit the country in 50 years and thus could not have been anticipated. Nevertheless, the leadership at all levels is concerned with a possible public backlash if they are perceived as failing to respond effectively. Chen commented the storms come at a "particularly sensitive time" when China's leadership is already concerned about rising inflation. Adding to the uncertainty, Chen said, this disaster comes right after a major reshuffling of provincial leaders following the 17th Communist Party Congress last October, meaning many new and untested provincial leaders are on the front lines, and all are fearful of being blamed for failing to prepare.

18. (C) Xu Cunyao (protect), longtime Embassy contact and former interpreter for Mao and Zhou Enlai, told Poloff January 30 that, politically, the challenge posed by the snowstorm in southern China could potentially be "as serious as the 2003 SARS crisis." No one can control the weather, of course, but Xu believed that, like in 2003, the center has been "very slow" to respond. The storms first hit around January 14, but only on January 29 did the central leadership "finally" respond fully by holding the special Politburo meeting. As a result, there could be a "price to pay" for this delayed response. At a minimum, there will be serious economic consequences. But, politically, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao's "close-to-the-people" image may take a hit. At some point, Xu predicted, there is also likely to be pressure to hold someone "accountable," meaning that "heads may roll" in the aftermath of the crisis, most likely at the local level. Xu nevertheless cautioned against exaggerating the potential threat to stability. The Party and Government, he stressed, have the means to maintain social stability nationwide, emphasizing that, once mobilized, the center has "awesome resources" it can bring to bear.

Center to the Rescue

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19. (U) China's propaganda apparatus is working at full speed to emphasize the government's response and concern for migrant workers stuck in train stations and on highways. The special Politburo meeting and Wen Jiabao's visit to Hunan were the lead stories on all major Chinese newspapers today. A front page editorial in the People's Daily said, "All related

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localities and departments are actively taking countermeasures and devoting arduous efforts to disaster relief work (ref B)." For the week of January 28, China National Radio (CNR) devoted its entire morning news programming to the weather/transport crisis. While CNR's coverage has been heavy with official interviews and favorable stories on the government response, the station has also invited listeners stranded across China to send in text messages describing their situation. Several listeners described being stuck on roadways for up to five days. China Central Television this week also aired extensive special coverage of the disaster.

110. (U) Not all media coverage of the government response has been favorable. The Xinhua Bao (Beijing News) ran an editorial January 29 criticizing the lack of government transparency as the catastrophe unfolded. Confused information over road closings contributed to the disaster, the paper charged,

complaining that some officials refused to share information with journalists.

#### Harsh Reviews from Netizens

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**¶11. (SBU)** Bloggers and chat room participants appeared unimpressed with the government's propaganda and blasted the leadership's slow reaction time. One Sina.com poster described the disaster as "30 percent weather, 70 man-made." "The snowstorm has been going on for several days," another Sina poster wrote, "where was our military force, where was our Party and where was our government?" Many chat room participants also faulted the inaccuracy of government weather forecasts. A small minority gave the government some praise for its response.

#### Beijing Train Station Calm

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**¶12. (SBU)** In contrast to Guangzhou (refs A,C), Beijing's main train station was calm and not particularly crowded January 30. Though PolOff saw a very visible police presence with seven vans in the square outside the station, this was not noticeably greater than during previous Chinese New Year holidays. Many Beijing residents appeared to have given up plans to head south for the holidays. One construction company employee in Beijing Station with whom PolOff spoke said he had been trying, in vain, to sell his ticket to Shanghai.

#### Broader Economic Implications

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**¶13. (U)** Whatever the possible political implications of the storm and the center's response, the weather is almost certain to exacerbate inflation, already hovering at 11-year highs and a top concern of the government as the March opening of the National People's Congress approaches, according to the comments of Merrill Lynch's Beijing-based economist Ting Lu in a January 30 research note. Lu's comments were echoed by two other economists who spoke with EconOffs. Vegetable prices in particular have doubled in some areas in recent days because produce has been destroyed or stuck on farms. Lu observed that the chaos caused by weather points to significant infrastructure underinvestment and predicted stepped-up investment in power transmission and transportation that could help narrow the gap between coastal and interior regions.

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